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Tokyo in 24 Hours

You can stay in Tokyo all your life and not know everything about this quirky, zany, over the top, wonderfully detailed, culturally rich and culinary well-endowed metropolis. So with only 24 hours to spare, it would be safe to say that my recent visit to Japan's capital – and Asia's hub for sensory overload – would only allow me to skim the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Still, having done my homework, it is possible to get a comprehensive teaser to this vibrant city with enough time to take home some souvenirs to boot.

6AM

The best way to see Tokyo is via the labyrinthine, yet superbly efficient, subterranean train system. But I lucked out this time round and had the luxury of a chauffeur-driven hotel minibus to help me squeeze in as much as possible within a day.

If food (predominantly seafood) is your thing, then a visit to Tsukiji Market is a must. But you need to get here early (around 5am is ideal) if you are to see the place at the height of its glorious action. Wholesalers scurry about, prepping their goods of fresh fish, eels and other sea creatures, and their derivatives for sale. Watch out for the onslaught of "oil drums on wheels" (market workers' runners) on the streets and in shop-lined lanes. Home-makers make their rounds among shops selling dried provisions, kitchenware, cooked food (quick breakfast for office workers) and household services. I managed to pick up some easy-to-pack gifts—dried seaweed that become supple when hydrated, and Japanese paper placemats.

Getting an early start at Tsukiji gave me a good part of the morning to explore a hip, happening row of boutiques offering apparel ranging from the down-to-earth to the out-of-this-world. Check out the double-storey Burton store near here to see the latest zines in snowboarding and grunge chic. You won't go hungry here as food can be found at the ubiquitous McDonald's fast-food restaurant as well as discreet, hole-in-the-wall Japanese eateries.

A short stroll away is Omotesando, a tree-lined avenue of affordable to upmarket international brands, and side lanes of trendy F&B outlets and knick-knack shops. Zipping into the famous Omotesando Hills, I had my lunch at Vegetable House: Yasaiya Mei. Veggies (six courses of them) never looked or tasted this good before.

2PM

A half-hour drive afforded me a much-needed power nap before arriving at Asakusa to visit its famous Sensoji Temple. This oldest temple in Tokyo is Buddhist and dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy. Between Kaminarimon (ThunderGate) and Hozomon (Treasure House Gate), where a colossal red lantern suspends from each, is Nakamise-dori's grid of shops selling edibles, kimonos, souvenirs and toys. I did well, bagging prettily-boxed mochi, pancakes and rice crackers, kimonos and a magnet.

8PM AND BEYOND

When night arrives, Roppongi comes alive. After a quick clean up at the hotel, I entered this celebrated district better known for its night-time attractions that border on the legal. Finding a place to eat here is not a problem as restaurants proliferate, offering samplings of Western fare to sushi joints that theme with salarymen finding a meal after work. Nightclubs, karaoke lounges and other distractions can be identified by bouncers standing guard while a balance of locals and expatriates with various agendas hustle about looking for the evening's highlight. Roppongi, like Tokyo, is a microcosm of the city and, in turn, the people that make their home here. Twenty-four hours is hardly enough time to understand a city like this but it is enough to know that I need to return for more.



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